

FUNCHAYAT

JAGRATI

AN EXHIBITION OF WORK BY ASIAN WOMEN ARTISTS.

AT

GREENWICH CITIZENS GALLERY
POWIS STREET, WOOLWICH, S.E.18.

FROM

14TH OCTOBER - 22ND NOVEMBER

OPENING TIMES:

Tuesday to Saturday 10am-6pm(Closed Mondays)

NO.	ARTIST	TITLE	MEDIUM
1.	Zarina Bhimji.	"For the White Feminists"	Photography(B/W)
2.	Chila Burman.	Photographs of the Mural commissioned by the Roundhouse Black Arts Centre.	Acrylic on Plywood.
3.	Shanti Thomas.	(a)"City Tempo"	Oils
		(b)"Slow Movement"	Charcoal
4.	Shmina Khanour.	"Pakistan Scenes"	Photography(Colour)
5.	Symruth Bhatti.	(a)"Jeetu-Papu"	Collage
		(b) Sketches for a memorial - "Yaadgari"	Collage
6.	Nina Edge.	(a) "The Jewel"	Monoprint
		(b) "The Crown"	" "
		(c) "Fingerplate"	" "
		(d) "We three things from Orient are"	" "
		(e) "Diamond Coloured"	" "
		(f) "Diamond Skin Rug"	" "
		(g) "Gem"	" "
		(h) "Ink is a girls best friend"	" "
		(i) "Searching for flowers in the Tandoori Garden"	Drawing
		(j) "Chips on her shoulders her arms fell off"	Drawing
		(k) "Trying not to offend my parents"	Drawing
		(l) "'Paki' goes home on a piece of spit"	Drawing
7.	Dushka Ahmed.	Mural commissioned by G.A.W.A.G. "Women and Domestic Violence"	Paint

NO.	ARTIST	TITLE	MEDIUM
8.	Sukhwinder Saund.	(a) Untitled	Painting
		(b) Untitled	Painting
9.	Bhajan Hunjan.	(a) Untitled	
		(b) Tribute to Late Balwant Kaur and Gurdip Kaur - Victims of Domestic Violence	
		(c) "Divided II"	
10.	Murmtaz Karimji.	(a) Untitled	Photography(B/W)
		(b) Untitled	" " "
		(c) Untitled	" " "
		(d) Untitled	" " "
		(e) Untitled	" " "
11.	Sutapa Biswas.	"Que Sera Sera"	Painting
12.	Ranjana Sharda.	(a) Untitled	Photography(Colour)
		(b) Untitled	" " "
		(c) Untitled	" " "
13.	Naomi Imy.	(a) Untitled	Drawing
		(b) Untitled	Drawing

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JAGRATI - An exhibition by thirteen Asian women artists

Jagrati (Awakening) is the name of this exhibition of work by Asian women artists which was planned and organised by the Greenwich Asian Womens Arts Group. It features work by DUSHKA AHMED, SYMRUTH BHATTI, ZARINA BHIMJI, SUTAPA BISWAS, CHILA KUMARI BURMAN, NINA EDGE, BHAJAN HUNJAN, NAOMI INY, MUMTAZ KARIMJEE, SHAMINA KHANOUR, SUKHWINDER SAUND, RANJANA SHARDA and SHANTI THOMAS.

BACKGROUND

Initially, the idea was to organise an exhibition which would focus on the issue of domestic violence but eventually it evolved into a broader exhibition by Asian women artists. It is the largest exhibition of its kind ever to be organised. To our knowledge, only two other shows concentrating on the work of Asian women artists have been held in Britain, Four Indian Women Artists at the Indian Artists (UK) Gallery in 1982 and Numaish at the People's Gallery earlier this year.

A number of intentions went into the concept of this exhibition, making the work of these artists accessible to the Asian community; connecting the work of these artists to the experience of the Asian community; enabling the artists to develop a dialogue within the community to raise issues of artistic and political relevance; providing a forum for the artists to debate issues relating to their practice and creating a space for positive criticism and practical support. Nonetheless the organisers are aware of the limitations of exhibiting work in a gallery environment which is addressing a white middle-class audience.

Isolation, poverty, shortage of studio space and the lack of opportunities to exhibit are all problems which confront visual artists. The process of collaboration between visual artists is still relatively new. These problems are multiplied by the triple effects of gender, race and class. Black artists are faced with the contradictions involved in situating themselves in a eurocentric tradition of art history and criticism. This exhibition highlights some of these issues and is intended as a starting point in the debate.

Parallel with the developments in black arts activity has been the development in the voluntary sector of community organizations which address the needs of the Asian community by setting up refuges for Asian women, hostels for Asian girls and Asian elderly, meals provision for Asian elderly, resource and recreational centres for Asian people which are outside the networks of religious or regionally based organizations. The movement has been towards providing facilities which challenge the divisions of religion, region, caste and class.

Over the past twelve months the horrifying murders of Balwant Kaur and Gurdip Kaur have led to campaigns being fought to press for justice for these women and their children. Jagrati features work which reveals the impact these two murders have had on the Asian women's movement and the Asian community in general. It is a point of departure for the exhibition and for future campaigns and anchors the concerns of these artists very firmly in the here and now.

THE WORK

The work on show includes painting, drawing, collage, photography and mural work. All the women participating in this exhibition are professional artists and almost all of them have been trained in art schools or colleges. Their experiences and concerns, at times strikingly similar and at times sharply divergent, provide the shifting focus of this exhibition. The artists make individual as well as collective statements relating to their heritage, identities, relationship with family and friends, the situation of Asian women and the human condition.

The experience of fragmentation and isolation is central to the exhibition. Solitary female figures recur in the work, encircled and at times overwhelmed by the symbols of tradition and gender oppression. A sense of dislocation and unreality pervades many of the pieces but also a purposeful desire to reconstruct from the ashes. Hesitant and tentative sometimes, aggressive and assertive at others the work wrestles with the dualities of existence.

Breaking through the veils of tradition and gender the women also reach out to embrace other women in a real sisterhood, not the sisterhood of rhetoric but a living, breathing, sisterhood which comforts, sustains and inspires. The sombre everyday reality of women's lives is portrayed but symbols of hope and rebellion intervene.

The tone varies from searing political comment to ironic self-parody. The 'objective' distance of the viewer is challenged. Witty asides on the tyranny and appropriation of the art school tradition or the white women's movement and the experience of cultural imperialism are interspersed. Some of the artists' concerns are formal and technical - the use of space and light, the erosion and blurring of different media, the influence of traditional crafts such as embroidery and pottery and tapestry surface from time to time.

THE ARTISTS

Zarina Bhimji's series of copper-toned photographs which are mounted as a narrative titled 'For the white feminists' examines the nature of the image of women while counterpointing the often vexed relationship between white feminists and their black sisters. Text and image form a commentary.

Shanti Thomas takes on the theme of women. Her two pictures make statements about the individual and collective experience of women. In one, City Tempo, an Asian woman is shown stranded and alone surrounded by the noise and bustle of the urban environment and in the other muted charcoal drawing women are depicted as separate but united in the same space and through the same experiences showing the Slow Movement towards liberation.

Symruth Bhatti's work is again directly concerned with the Asian woman's situation and her relationship to the symbols of tradition. The image is fragmented, using the technique of collage and pastels, watercolours and acrylic paint, sections are painted and then pasted down or fixed with more paint to create a multi-layered tactile effect. Isolation is opposed to the sisterhood of women in her work.

Shamina Khanour's work is a testimony to the resilience of women on the sub-continent of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Her colour photographs, taken in Pakistan show the continuity of womens experience through three generations of women seen in a rural environment. The faces of the women observe the viewer with self-possession and invert the experience of observation.

Nina Edge's series of drawings mounted on gold card titled 'Ink is a girl's best friend' make witty and tragi-comic comments on the situation of Asian women. There is a light, ironic touch bordering on self-parody, which belies the poignancy of her work. Drawings such as 'We three things of orient are', 'Girl with chips on her shoulders,' satirise the exotic view of Asian culture.

Dushka Ahmed's large mural, which was commissioned by the Greenwich Asian Womens Art Group, is a chilling testament to the murders of Asian women in the home. It is stark and immediate using the black and white of newsprint enlarged and layered. The grim reality of the physical and mental abuse which women suffer in the home and the tragedy of these murders need no further amplification.

Bhajan Hunjan expands on this theme in her acrylic paintings which depict Asian women, the victims of violence and containment entrapped by the symbols of tradition and culture. 'Tribute to Salwant Kaur and Gurdas Kaur' is a direct statement but in 'Divided II' she goes further to suggest that we are not only oppressed by external forces but that we also impose limitations upon ourselves and cage ourselves.

Mumtaz Karimjee's black and white photographs play with form, repetition and texture. The resigned face of a woman fairground worker enclosed in her booth contrasts starkly with a row of laughing wooden clowns alongside. It is funny and sad. A lone woman recedes in a landscape so desolate it is almost a moonscape. Yet the timelessness of the images of patterns of water and sand suggest the inevitability of tides and nature and perhaps counsel patience.

Chila Kumari Burman's work in the show are photographs of a mural which she completed this year for the Roundhouse arts centre. Her involvement with mural painting over the past year is one example of an artist's private and public concerns fusing in the creation and execution of large scale murals for the local community in Southall. She has also painted a mural in Southall with Keith Piper and is currently engaged in another mural project for Southall Trades Council.

Sukhwinder Saund's series of collage paintings are experiments with colour and form. She says, 'My subject matter dwells on me trying to restore my personal historical Indian heritage.' Her exercises are striking in their use of colour which she feels has a 'mystical significance'. They progress towards an expression of emotional and cerebral abstractions. These are not pretty pictures designed to please but images with jagged edges designed to provoke.

Sutapa Biswas's painting 'Que Sera, Que Sera' returns us to the experience of childhood. This large painting depicts a child looking up to the mother whom we see up to the waist, and it returns the adult viewer to the experience of being a child and the vulnerability of that feeling. The use of colour is strong and selective, as in memory, and the perspective though that of the child is also strangely that of the mother.

Ranjana Sharda's colour photographs taken in Italy show a subtle use of light and space and depict personal and public space. We see small groups of nuns, in one photograph, distant from the viewer, enclosed in the lofty architecture of the Vatican illuminated by small pools of light. Again in the Vatican we see two Asian women striding purposefully through the forbidding pillars of the cathedral imposing themselves on the environment though dwarfed by it.

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In some pieces of work I feel that the artist has been overburdened by the weighty considerations of race, class and gender and the result is a loss of spontaneity and joy. In other pieces the abstract and the cerebral distance us from the reality of everyday experience. Some of the pieces on show have the quality of interior monologues, while others are clearly didactic in intent. Yet the weaknesses of one artist are the strengths of another. The work complements and balances itself in an unforced and natural way.

Anita Desai, the Indian novelist, in an essay about her approach to writing and regionalism in literature, says 'Imagination of my kind is most caught, most fired, most worked upon by the unfamiliar: I have thriven accordingly on the changes and chances, the dislocations and contrasts which have made up much of my life. That may be why 'my' world (my world as a writer) is something of a mosaic. As it is, it is something that has assembled itself.' Something of this spirit of re-creation and re-invention is evident in the work exhibited in Jagrati.

Viewed as a whole, this exhibition is a powerful illustration of the range and diversity of subject matter and technique in the work of Asian women artists. Jagrati hints at the tremendous potential for expression, interpretation and affirmation among women artists. The history of Asian womens involvement in the arts is a long and as yet unwritten one. This exhibition is one of the first steps in the reclamation of that history and these artists are a few of the many.

Fay Rodrigues

1986

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